

Indigenous People and the Rise of the Right

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On January 29, 2022, a group of protestors calling themselves the ‘Freedom Convoy,’ who, at its peak, was comprised of over 15,000 people from across Canada, began their nearly month-long occupation of downtown Ottawa, centring on Parliament Hill. The crowd first began their efforts motivated by opposition to COVID-19 restrictions and public health mandates but quickly evolved to claim they were standing up for what they perceived as a general, longstanding violation of their rights and “how the government’s been manipulating the population and oppressing us all the time.¹ Throughout that nearly month-long period, and long afterwards, people across the country were inundated with stories and images of these so-called ‘freedom fighters.’ Notably, among these accounts were signs in the crowds containing hate symbols like swastikas and confederate flags, as well as letters demanding that sitting politicians, including the Prime Minister, resign in order to compel protestors to end the occupation. For many, the hateful and anti-democratic outputs from the convoy made it clear that we were living through a moment of significant far-right organizing in Canada— highlighting our place within a concerning growth in far-right politics across the globe.²

In truth, however, Canada has long been implicated in the phenomenon of the rising right— before the Freedom Convoy ever pushed the bubbling conversation to a boil. Moreover, communities targeted by the far-right’s push for power have been grappling with the harm brought on and were advocating for solutions long before the general public realized the depths of their implication. This essay looks at the relationship between far-right momentum and one group in particular: Indigenous people. Though I will show here that the Canadian far-right promotes an ideology and vision of politics that is decidedly harmful to Indigenous people, we increasingly find them posturing as embracing Indigenous people in their movements. Indeed, part of the motivation for this paper was the confusion I observed from onlookers of the Freedom Convoy when, among the hundreds of images from the protests, they saw Indigenous people performing pipe ceremonies with members of the crowd, trucks donning ‘Every Child Matters’ flags, and other signs associated with Indigenous causes.

In response, I insist that this occurrence should be read as a manipulation of Indigenous experiences with colonialism, which the far-right deliberately evokes in an attempt to legitimize their politics and demands, and bandwagon off the current political climate. Importantly, I also want to briefly suggest that to resist this happening, standard solutions to the rise of the far-right (such as anti-radicalization policies, increased training and data-collection, etc.) will not suffice. Instead, progressive movements must work alongside Indigenous people to dismantle the settler-colonial status quo.

Firstly, in making the argument that Indigenous oppression is being used as a tool to benefit a far-right agenda, I want to avoid painting Indigenous members of these far-right groups— of which there is some number— as actors without agency. My intent here is not to suggest they are simply a misguided minority who are unaware of how their identities are used for nefarious ends. Neither their Indigeneity nor any exploited status within this political faction absolves Indigenous people of accountability for the harms they endorse and perpetuate as supporters of the far-right. In short, this essay takes seriously the view that Indigenous people can simultaneously be harmed and cause harm. It recognizes that Indigenous people are not politically homogenous and, thus, have a variety of political commitments and may take positions, including extremist ones, even

to the disagreement and harm of others with whom they share an identity. Delving more deeply into these points is a task unto itself, but this essay only seeks to overview and accept this point briefly.

The Far-Right and Harm to Indigenous People

Finally, before making this paper's central arguments, it is essential to clarify who constitutes the 'far-right' and, since I am to argue that their evocation of Indigenous oppression is disingenuous, what their actual politics towards Indigenous people are. The far-right— often also referred to as the alt-right— is a political faction whose ideologies include any combination of “populism, neo-fascism, extractivism, racism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia, white supremacy, and ultra-nationalism.”⁵ The Organization for the Prevention of Violence also notes that while not a homogenous entity, and while many may not self-identify as members of the far-right, they nonetheless exist in “a far-right ecosystem where different groups feed off each other.”⁶ The culmination of this ecosystem of beliefs is a vision of social and political hierarchy wherein white, cisgender, heterosexual, men, are at the top, and women, people of colour, queer people, etc., are inferior. Actionably, the far-right may try and achieve their goals through a militarized and otherwise violent means of change or through traditional elected politics while still using the tools of the state to pursue political agendas which decidedly harm the aforementioned groups of people.

In terms of the far-right's relationship with Indigenous people in Canada, we can find numerous examples outlining a harmful targeting of the latter group by the former. For example, the Proud Boys, a prominent far-right group self-identifying as “Western chauvinists”⁷ that originated in Canada and has since expanded into the US, was put on Canada's domestic terrorist watchlist in 2021. This decision was prompted by their repeated violence at political rallies and known targeting of Indigenous groups.⁸ Notable to this essay, it was also reported that hundreds of those individuals who donated to the Freedom Convoy efforts were also donors to Proud Boy fundraisers.⁹

Another, more recent example of extremist focus on Indigenous people can be seen in Alberta, where a minority group of lawyers have organized a petition demanding the abandonment of mandatory Indigenous cultural competency training for provincial lawyers. The logic given for this protest included denialism of discrimination and the insistence that this training amounted to “indoctrination, into a particular brand of wokeness called “decolonization.”¹⁰ Here, we see hallmarks of far-right ideology including a belief in a false or conspiratorial conception of history, and an insistence that individual freedoms are under attack by public institutions to the exclusive benefit of certain groups. These are only a handful of examples, but hopefully give a sense of the repeated, ongoing way that Indigenous people are put in harm's way by members of the far-right and far-right ideologies.

So why would members of the far-right begin to highlight Indigenous causes alongside their own? One answer, suggested below, is that Indigenous people's oppression under settler-colonialism is easily made into a tool to emphasize the far-right's objectives and shield them from accusations of racism.

Paralleling Claims to Sovereignty

One of the frequent embodiments of far-right politics we see in Canada is far-right politicians and supporters who advocate for separation from what they deem the oppressive federal state so that their extremist political agendas can flourish without censure from a higher government. In these cases, we should first consider the outright anti-Indigeneity in attempting to declare sovereignty over land that has never been ceded by Indigenous nations and is subject to treaty partnerships. Yes, the demand is profoundly unjust in its willingness to bypass or ignore longstanding Indigenous presence and nationhood in a given place. However, this claim is only made more appalling since the political order sought to be imposed if this sovereignty was obtained very likely further harms Indigenous people. In other words, these sovereigntist factions are not seeking separation to forge new, better partnerships with Indigenous peoples or return their lands to them— they seek to become the new supreme settler-colonial power.

More than how they invisibilize and undermine Indigenous people, we want to understand how these far-right factions use Indigenous people to their advantage. Here, we turn, for example, to Alberta Premier Danielle Smith’s insistence from December 2022 that Ottawa mistreats Alberta in “exactly the same” way as Indigenous people are under the infamously oppressive Indian Act.¹¹ Smith, who has been called out previously for her push of far-right conspiracy theories,¹² evokes this comparison in a context where she was attempting to legitimize her government’s bill titled the Alberta Sovereignty Act. This Act was meant to give her cabinet the power to veto decisions from Ottawa they deem as ‘harmful to Alberta’— notably, freedom or sovereignty from a claimed authoritarianism is a common far-right demand.¹³ The act is also one that Chiefs and Indigenous communities widely opposed in Alberta as an affront to treaty relationships.¹⁴

Smith’s evocation of Indigenous struggle is not done to serve Indigenous people. She does not model the solidarity necessary that comes from genuinely recognizing shared oppression (perceived or actual). Instead, Indigenous oppression is contorted and minimized to be made a useful argumentative tool. The wholly apocalyptic and genocidal project of settler-colonialism is deemed akin to jurisdictional disagreements. Beyond the profound insult of using Indigenous oppression in this self-serving way, we should also anticipate that this co-option could impact the minds of onlookers and make mainstream dangerous questions, including: “how different are these sovereignty claims, really? Are these groups truly alike? If we should not take such claims of oppression seriously, why should we take Indigenous peoples as such?”. We, of course, cannot know if such questions have truly taken root in a significant number of people— but the possibility only adds to the anxiety that Indigenous people, who are already countering numerous existing harms, will have to address further undermining.

Bandwagoning

A second reason Indigenous oppression might be utilized by the far-right in the Canadian context is to absorb some of the public goodwill found in this supposed era of reconciliation, thus shielding them from charges of racism. To return to the Freedom Convoy, we are reminded that here, too, that Indigenous struggles were evoked alongside far-right demands. Creating these links between causes is an attempt to plant seeds in the minds of the public that there are comparable denials of freedom taking place. As such, it sets the foundation for a line of argumentation that resistance to one violation of freedom should be supported like the other. This form of bandwagoning serves to gain some goodwill from those uncritically supportive of Indigenous

struggles. More commonly, however, it also provides evidence that defenders of the far-right can draw on to shield their otherwise harmful actions. Though a weak argument given the widely demonstrated character of the far-right, Indigenous presence at the Freedom Convoy allows defenders to argue: “We cannot possibly be a white supremacist group. Look at our support for non-white people.” To this last point, this tactic introduces the potential of emboldening more members of the far-right to see Indigenous people as allies in their cause. The result would be to invite further co-option that Indigenous people would need to contend with or direct targeted anger at those many Indigenous people who resist this imposed allyship.

If we take seriously my claim that Indigenous oppression is being disingenuously employed, then there is a level of desire to keep Indigenous people oppressed for their utility. Yes, if Indigenous people were less sympathetic subjects in the eyes of the general public, or if they were under less threat by settler-colonialism, the comparison of struggle would do little to bolster the far-right’s causes. I believe this is crucial in explaining why we do not see the struggles of other groups utilized in the same way as Indigenous people’s, described here. Though there are many instances of oppression in Canada that members of the far-right could draw, the Indigenous struggle is embraced for a deliberate reason: it holds a particular instrumental salience in this country at this time. This is what makes it worthwhile to suspend ideological commitments that would otherwise immediately reject Indigenous presence.

To end this paper, I will briefly sketch out the path necessary to resist these co-options and their adverse impacts. To date, actions advocated to combat far-right extremism have primarily taken the following shape: Invest in anti-radicalization identification and training, collect greater data on the presence and proliferation of far-right activity, take harsher action against existing far-right activity (particularly online), and proactively reach at-risk individuals with public investments.¹⁵ These are not poor action items, and they certainly have a role in countering far-right extremism. However, they still need to be improved in addressing the Indigenous-specific harms outlined here. To tackle this phenomenon meaningfully, all progressive movements and governments must commit to combatting settler colonialism seriously. How is the rising far-right related to settler colonialism?

Firstly, it is settler-colonial mythology that claims that mainly white, male, European-descended individuals have an inherent and inalienable right to this land and, further, to conduct whatever governance they see fit on them—these are hallmarks of far-right ideology. Indeed, Indigenous people have long fought for broad recognition of our longstanding presence on these territories and the subsequent obligation of all settlers to enter into meaningful partnerships with those with whom the land is shared. Freedom, understood here, is not limitless individual liberties but a state of living guaranteed based on upholding responsibilities to one another. This insistence stands in stark contrast to the foundational beliefs of the far-right, and yet, is rarely viewed as a critical project to support in their mitigation. It is also settler-colonialism which has facilitated Indigenous oppression such that the far-right can identify parallels to it for their utility. When we take the ongoing harms of settler-colonialism seriously, we develop an intolerance for its casual and false evocation; we work to restore Indigenous place in our social and political orders such that they cannot be reduced pawns in another’s project. Indeed, without earnestly contending with settler colonialism—the root of what contributes to a far-right sense of entitlement and the structural reduction of Indigenous peoples—Canada cannot hope to address the harms the rising right causes to Indigenous people and all the country.

Conclusion

In sum, though the far-right has repeatedly shown that they are no friend to Indigenous people, we increasingly see them evoke Indigenous oppression alongside their extremist demands. The rationale for this phenomenon, I have argued, is that members of the far-right have found it possible and valuable to turn Indigenous struggles against settler colonialism into a tool emphasizing their demands. This tactic benefits them as a means to usurp public goodwill that has been so difficultly fought for by Indigenous people and to shield them from charges of racism or bigotry—legitimizing their efforts. The full scope of impact of this growing occurrence is not yet known, though we keep a keen eye on how it might shift the public perception and support of Indigenous struggles. Moreover, we know that, at the very least, it invites the continued co-option and targeting from the far-right and adds to an already substantial burden of harm for Indigenous people to contend with. More research can and should be done to understand how the far-right exploits Indigenous people more deeply and what impacts they feel from this exploitation in their day-to-day lives. In the meantime, taking these claims seriously will mean that Canadian governments and progressive movements must consider their commitments to addressing settler-colonialism and supporting ongoing Indigenous resistance to its proliferation. The factors leading to the rise of the far-right do not exist in a silo. Indigenous people and other resistant communities have long known this—it's time we more keenly listen.

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